

Science-Based Salmon Habitat Restoration and Social Conflict in the Pacific Northwest: a Case Study of the Skagit Valley

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Too often scientists and resource managers rely overwhelmingly on biological information to formulate conservation plans, failing to consider the social dimensions of environmental problems. Using ethnographic and participatory research methods, this study documents local perceptions of science, history, place, and other people in an effort to understand some of the cultural and political forces driving the intense and immensely complicated controversy over salmon habitat restoration in the Skagit Valley of Western Washington. Preliminary, qualitative results suggest, for example, that social groups here are polarized along multiple axes, such as occupation, ethnicity, gender, political identity, religious beliefs, and urban/rural residency. Most of these groups, including natural resource agencies, restoration advocates, the agricultural community, and the tribes, rely heavily on scientific and technical arguments in order to achieve resource-based goals. At the same time, individuals from each group call for more “education” about particular ecological, economic, or historical conditions that they face or care about. Plans for future research are to compare how, if at all, national differences in environmental policies and in the status of native groups in the United States and Canada result in different social dynamics surrounding restoration in the Skagit and Fraser river valleys.